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From 'Renaissance' to Referendum?

Literature and Critique in Scotland, 1918-2014

Alex Thomson

The 2014 referendum campaign in Scotland emphasised many national divisions. One that struck contemporary observers with particular force was the disproportionate prevalence of support for independence within what had once been known as 'the arts', but which contemporary technocratic jargon prefers to call the creative and cultural industries. Writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers: with a few notable exceptions — a fistful of avowed Unionists, honourable refuseniks, some elements of the left — those who spoke up in public urged Scotland to vote Yes. Nor was this simply a question of the pro-independence camp's success in seeking celebrity endorsements, and in exploiting the weightless political opinion mill provided by social media. Commentators also noted a striking crossover between some of the grassroots campaigning that sprung up under the umbrella of the Yes campaign and the rank-and-file artistic community: the most high-profile being National Collective, whose slogan 'Artists and Creatives for Independence', with its awkward collision of political and managerial registers, has the authentic smack of the period. Based on the evidence of their public statements, interviews and even cultural manifestoes, it seemed that the artistic elites were disproportionately favourable to the prospect of independence compared with the population as a whole.

The appearance of a disjunction between the cultural sector and society at large bulwarked a longstanding nationalist claim that the arts had not only served to

preserve a distinctive Scottish cultural identity since the Union of 1707, but had been an active vehicle for political identity-formation in Scotland since at least the Renaissance movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas between 1979 and 1997, common opposition to Thatcherism had served to unite artists and writers with a broad spectrum of Scottish civil society, this new alignment of artists with the Scottish government against majority opinion was more troubling. It threatened to confirm the vanguardist ambitions of a nationalist project that had been characterised by its political moderation, at least since the parting of the ways between Hugh MacDiarmid and John McCormick in the 1930s. This torsion is neatly exposed in an unguarded comment by the novelist Alan Warner:

A no vote will create a savage and profound division between the voters of Scotland and its literature; a new convulsion. It will be the death knell for the whole Scottish literature “project” — a crushing denial of an identity that writers have been meticulously accumulating.¹

Warner’s comments bring to mind Brecht’s suggestion in his poem ‘The Solution’: if the people fail to live up to the expectations of the writers, they will have to be dissolved and another created. Here perhaps was the hidden truth of the critical commonplace that Scotland’s artists had been its unacknowledged legislators: a self-appointed elite who knew the country better than the people themselves.

However tendentious, Warner’s comments reflected a widespread interpretation of Scottish cultural history at the time of the referendum, in which late twentieth-century artistic revival, belatedly fulfilling the hopes of the 1920s and 30s Renaissance

¹ ‘Scottish Writers on the Referendum: Independence Day?’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 19th July 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote>

movement, not only preceded, but shaped the political trajectory to devolution and beyond. The academic cultural historian Cairns Craig made the case explicitly in an essay published a matter of weeks before the referendum:

the overwhelming vote in favour of devolution in 1997 was not produced by the political parties — they were small boats floating on a rising tide of cultural nationalism that went from the rediscovery of the art of the Glasgow boys and the Scottish colourists to the music of the Proclaimers and Runrig, from the writings of Nan Shepherd to Ian Rankin's *Rebus*.²

This account inverted the pathological interpretation of Scotland as a nation in long-term decline that had been common in the earlier period, and had been revived in the aftermath of the 1979 referendum. This echoes the rhetoric of the Yes campaign. Now that the writers and artists had restored the nation's faith in its own capabilities, a vote for independence would not only inaugurate a new future but redeem the failures of history, enacting a typological fulfillment of the past in the plenitude of present possibility.

But at this point the historian has to demur: the continuity claimed at the time was an illusion. The potent blend of aesthetics and politics in the rhetoric of the Independence movement was itself the real break with the past, attesting not to the critical power of the arts but to their subsumption by contemporary politics. In this paper I will try to specify some of the distinctive features of this reversal, by offering a counter narrative to the culturalist interpretation. To challenge the assumption of continuity within twentieth century Scottish cultural history, I deploy discontinuity as a heuristic device, distinguishing in broad terms between the 'Renaissance', the

² 'The Case for Culture', *Scottish Review of Books*, 10:3 (2014), 20.

‘devolutionary’ and the ‘referendum’ periods. In my conclusion I will offer some further reflections on the political conditions for the emergence of the aesthetic discourse of the Yes campaign, and on its ambiguities.

The twentieth-century Renaissance and its legacies: 1918-1970

Although some cultural critics have claimed a significant awakening of national self-consciousness in the later 19th century, the terms of Scottish cultural debate throughout the remainder of the 20th century were largely set in the 1920s and 1930s. As Richard Finlay has shown, the diagnosis of economic and cultural decline in the period was a commonplace amongst Scottish intellectuals. This in turn reflects a larger tendency, across Europe and the USA, to articulate political and social crisis in cultural terms, giving a new prominence to questions of nation and race. One consequence of this is a renewed interest in the national cultures of the British Isles.³ Matthew Arnold’s influential argument that the strength of English literature sprang from its hybrid racial mix left open discursive space for a hypothetical rebirth of literature through a reassertion of Celtic sources.⁴ Following Arnold, Eliot conceives cultural modernization in Britain in terms of a convergence whose vitality requires

³ Richard Finlay, ‘National Identity in Crisis: Politicians, Intellectuals and the “End of Scotland”, 1920-1939, *History*, 79 (1994), 242-59; for the broader picture see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London, 1958); for the USA, Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham, NC, 1995); for England, Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, 2004) and Peter Mandler, *English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven, 2006).

⁴ c.f. Daniel Williams, *Ethnicity and Cultural Authority: from Arnold to Dubois* (Edinburgh, 2006); Laura O’Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, The British Empire, and de-Anglicization* (Baltimore, 2006).

continual differentiation of its sources: modernist literary reaction more generally tended to increase rather than diminish national differentiation within Britain.⁵ But the combination of the idea of crisis and the idea of the nation are insufficient to define the novelty and specificity of the Scottish literary response, and thus the meaning of the twentieth century Scottish Renaissance movement.

The Renaissance needs to be understood not as an artistic movement professing the revival of vernacular styles and traditions, but as a revolutionary movement whose significance depends on its self-understanding as a variant of the wider aesthetic critique of modernity. What drew so many writers to radical politics was the perception that not just Scottish or British, but Western culture itself was in crisis. This is more than a merely diagnostic gesture: requiring the construction of contemporary history as the site of cultural crisis, and in so doing to actively precipitate a crisis of tradition, as a call for radical questioning and critique. Art plays several roles in this project: to the extent that it is successfully integrated into a decadent culture it needs to be challenged; in new and more radical forms it can serve as a medium for this questioning; and in its relation to the aesthetic ideal of an harmonious, reconciled and autonomous culture, it can help locate the standard against which the present is judged. This leads to a major ambiguity which challenges subsequent reception of the Renaissance. The ultimate goal is not the production of more realistic representations of modern social conditions, nor the liberation of art from the tastes of the bourgeoisie, but the dissolution of art back into life in a fully reconciled future nation. To this end the separation between contemporary national

⁵ Eliot's views are clearly expressed in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* [1948] (London, 1962). For a preliminary sketch of the broader picture, see Alex Thomson, 'The Asymmetry of British Modernism: Hugh MacDiarmid and Wyndham Lewis', *Modernist Cultures*, 8 (2013), 252-71.

culture and the arts may need to be sharpened in order to heighten the crisis. Radical experiment is licensed as a critical strategy, because the present time is recast not in terms of the peaceful handing over of tradition, but as a transitional state of emergency. The trope of ‘revival’ is inadequate to capture the exigency of this strategy.

To this end, the writing and criticism of the Renaissance movement deploys two characteristic strategies. The first is critical: an iconoclastic attack on the values of modern Scottish commercial society, interwoven with the repudiation of the recent tradition held to be responsible for the current situation. At times this amounts to a ‘kulturkampf’ directed against not just middlebrow taste, but the ‘cynicism, blindness, helplessness / The inner poverty of the vast majority of adult Scots’.⁶ The second is both radical and creative: the attempt to invent an art of the future. Since current forms have been contaminated by the commercial culture that has given birth to them, they must be replaced. Images of the past – and especially of an idealised medieval or Gaelic culture in which art and social life are imagined as harmoniously integrated – are to be used to refurnish both political and artistic imagination. At the heart of the Renaissance movement is this combination of reaction and invention, destruction and creation. There is no paradox in this alternation of pessimism and affirmation, once we see that the demand for critical retrieval of deeper sources of value stems from a single conception of modern history as the revelation of a more fundamental failure of tradition. On that basis, all the attributes of sociological modernization can be interpreted as symptoms of degeneration.

⁶ These are MacDiarmid’s term in his retrospective poem, published in 1947. ‘The Kulturkampf’, in Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (eds), *The Collected Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1978), 694-704, 698.

It is important to stress the novelty of these arguments in a Scottish context. They exploit a fault-line that can be seen quite clearly for the first time in George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901). Douglas Brown is an heir to Flaubert in depicting a provincial world whose inhabitants are blind to the aesthetic significance of their environment. For Brown's narrator, dawn is characterised in terms of 'unfamiliar delicacy in the familiar scene, a freshness and purity of aspect – almost an unearthliness – as though you viewed it through a crystal dream'. But the elder Gourlay is 'dead to the fairness of the scene'.⁷ Brown generalises this failure of vision into a national stereotype through the contrast between two types of imagination: 'Imagination may consecrate the world to a man, or it may merely be a visualizing faculty which sees that, as already perfect, which is still lying in the raw material'. The latter 'commercial imagination' is what makes the Scot the 'best of colonists'.⁸ But he lacks that higher imagination, 'both creative and consecrative', whose nascent presence in young Gourlay constitutes the book's great irony, and which suitably disciplined by thought 'might create an opulent and vivid mind'.⁹ By characterising this lower faculty as '*perfervidum ingenium*', traditionally associated with the Celts, Brown displaces the Arnoldian account of the racial sources of literary genius, aligning the artist not with the primitivist return to origins but with the tradition of modern aesthetic philosophy.¹⁰ In doing so he broadens the metropolitan critique of provincial vision – lapped up by Edinburgh critics as an attack on the

⁷ George Douglas Brown, *The House with the Green Shutters* (Harmondsworth: 1985), 39.

⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁹ Ibid., 162, 163.

¹⁰ Ibid., 98, emphasis in original.

sentimental and popular fiction of the kailyard – into a challenge to the national stereotypes of the enterprising and entrepreneurial Scot.

This attempt to view Scotland in the light of aesthetic modernity generates two central features of the Renaissance movement, the tensions between which are bequeathed to subsequent Scottish writers and artists. The first is a problematic interpretation of the cultural history of the preceding two centuries; the second is an artistic dynamism that responds to the utopian demand for artists to be both social and aesthetic visionaries. For Douglas Brown, provincial taste proves inadequate measured against the powers of the imagination heralded in the idealist philosophy and the classical models he had learned at the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford, and national tradition feels inadequate measured against the strengths of modern European literature. Later writers would extend this critique to Scotland as a whole, linking it to commerce and capitalism, rejecting the art and thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries out of hand, and diagnosing the failure of artistic imagination as a historical fall from grace. Edwin Muir's 'Scotland, 1941' is the most succinct artistic recollection of this view, tracing the dissolution of pre-Reformation rural community, and specifically identifying Protestantism with capitalism: 'We watch our cities burning in the pit, / To salve our souls grinding dull lucre out'.¹¹ In his depiction of pre-lapsarian idyll, Muir incorporates reference to Thomas the Rhymer to suggest the harmonious integration of poetry and imagination into the sphere of social existence – the 'green road winding up the ferny brae' being the path to fairyland, signalling the desirable co-existence and integration of the spiritual and mundane worlds. Critics have tended to find Muir's poem too categorical, but I suggest we take it seriously as a reminder

¹¹ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London, 1984), 97-8, 97.

that for the Renaissance, absent conditions of total social reconciliation, the achievement of adequate aesthetic form is at most a compensatory achievement. Muir's point about Burns and Scott is that art in unredeemed society can only be 'a sham', and absent a hubris that the severity of his style rejects, this would have to include his own work. Modern art is always an art of failure, and a national art is always the art of our own particular cultural disaster.

The uneven blending of cultural and historical criticism with artistic activism on which the idea of literary Renaissance is predicated can also be seen clearly in Christopher Grieve's work. On the one hand, Grieve is committed to demonstrating the possibility of a distinctively national art: by differentiating Scottish from English literature, forging of styles with deeper connection to popular life than is possible following bourgeois standards, and thereby vindicating the ideal of national aesthetic culture. This is the basis for his relationship to Burns – however degraded by the cult around the poet, there remains a genuine popular appreciation of the national poet which presages a potential regeneration. But on the other hand, Grieve's own more radical projects call for new forms and styles against which much of the work associated with the Renaissance itself remains hopelessly backward. This is true in both politics and poetics, as he has to distance himself from both the verse of the vernacular revival and the cause of home rule.

This tension can lead to apparent contradictions. For example, the *Northern Numbers* anthologies contain plenty of Georgian verse alongside more imagist or symbolist writing. Donald Mackenzie's poem 'Edinburgh', contributed to the second volume (1921), deploys the tropes of romantic cultural criticism and the clichés of a

neoclassical poetic diction to complain that ‘Commerce is placed o’er art; the harp is dumb, / The pen unhonoured: wealth doth learning shun’.¹² When in *Scottish Scene* (1934) Grieve’s alter ego Hugh MacDiarmid complains that ‘a similar vague diffused spirit of evil, emasculating the whole life of the nation and rendering any creative spirit, any real activity, impossible, has the whole of Scotland in its toils, and Edinburgh is its headquarters’, he is merely refashioning the earlier sentiment.¹³ MacDiarmid’s ‘spirit of evil’ is explained in context as a gloss of the Boyg from Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, but only a step in another direction lie the sentiments of Mackenzie’s poem: ‘Wouldst thou become, / O Modern Athens, Modern Babylon?’. As in much of his less successful occasional verse, the tone of MacDiarmid’s ‘kulturkampf’ can often border on kitsch, and his critical bluster might be taken as a sign of his awareness of the need to commit to using a rhetoric he recognises as hackneyed. There are lessons here for less cautious scribblers of the contemporary Yes movement, whether panegyrists or polemicists.

The same tensions between destructive historical criticism and artistic vision are more successfully reconciled in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, although their presence in combination is a sign of a high risk strategy. MacDiarmid’s great work is an epic of imagination, pitting the Dionysiac intoxication of the artist against the thistle, standing in by synecdoche for the entire conventional image-stock of national culture. The underlying impulse is Nietzschean, and it is the exemplary significance of the artist himself in this paradigm which accounts for much of the discomfort with which MacDiarmid’s project has been received. As Christoph Menke explains, for

¹² *Northern Numbers*, 2 (1921), 90.

¹³ ‘Edinburgh’, in Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene: or, The Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albion* (Edinburgh: 1934), 68-81, 70.

Nietzsche, ‘aesthetically autonomous art gains ethical-political import only through the figure of the artist – more precisely through our *learning from the artist*’. The artist’s capacity for intoxication, a state of ‘increased force and plenitude’ is emblematic of the purposeless praxis which would characterise an achieved aesthetic political condition.¹⁴

The structure of the poem bears this out. The poet-figure, physically passive before the thistle, overcomes it through the power of imaginative vision. The poem begins in a violent confrontation with the same manifestation of kitsch in national life that Renaissance criticism sought to drive out, before transcending this towards an experience of the infinite, necessary prelude to any earthly political reconstruction:

He canna Scotland see wha yet
Canna see the Infinite,
And Scotland in true scale to it.¹⁵ (ll.2527-9)

The emphasis on spiritual vision is entwined with an overcoming of self; not merely a renunciation, but an active cruelty and contempt directed towards both self and social world. Moreover, it remains an open question whether Scotland itself can live up to the ideal embodied by the artist:

Is Scotland big enough to be
A symbol o big enough to bee,
In wha w divine inebriety
A sicht abune contempt I’ll see?¹⁶ (ll. 2009-12)

¹⁴ Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York, 2013), 83 (emphasis in original), 85.

¹⁵ *Collected Poems* vol. 1, 83-167, 162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

I have stressed the inextricability of creation and destruction in the Renaissance project both to signal its utopianism and to highlight the tension between the aesthetic-political project of critique and more conventional political strategies. The embrace of radical politics by the artists of the Renaissance leads to a series of confrontations with more moderate standard-bearers of nationalist sentiment. Nationalist groups in twentieth-century Scotland have more often been vehicles for establishment renegotiation of administrative devolution and control than they have been advocates for radical social renewal, which suggests we might view the political role of the artistic fringe as closer to that of a ginger group. It is also true that many writers were skeptical of both artistic and social projects for renewal, a debate sometimes obscured by the elision of the tension between the Renaissance, narrowly defined, and other significant work of the period.

This difference is clearly dramatized in Nan Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse* (1930). Garry Forbes, University-educated engineer, returns to Fetter-Rothnie as emblem of modernization and social progress: he preaches what the novel describes ambiguously as the 'gospel of a rejuvenated world', reflecting the intertwining of myth and religion in the social doctrines of Renaissance writers.¹⁷ Forbes echoes the role of Ekdal in Ibsen's *Wild Duck*: he will unmask the lies by which the community lives in order to ready it for the cold blast of progress. But instead he learns lessons that might equally be directed at the author of *The House with the Green Shutters*. The Scottish rural world is not a parochial backwater, but nor is it the benign object of aesthetic vision. Its moral life has its own drama and complexity, and the landscape's power is

¹⁷ Nan Shepherd, *The Weatherhouse* (Edinburgh, 1988), 162.

elemental and disturbing. So while the novel records and explores what it describes as ‘the change in temper of a generation, the altered point of balance of the world’s knowledge, the press of passions other than individual and domestic’, Garry’s social enthusiasm founders: ‘How could one proclaim an ideal future when men and women persisted in being so stubbornly themselves?’.¹⁸ Shepherd’s vision is stubbornly anti-Pelagian, stressing moral complexity and ambivalence, suggesting both the persistence of older traditions of thought in twentieth century Scotland, but also the presence of a distinctively literary resistance to the idealism underpinning the work of the Renaissance writers.

The terms within which Scotland’s modernist writers understood their role dated rapidly in the period of retrenchment following the second world war. These attitudes aligned with a more general loss of faith in the transformative power of the intoxicated and iconoclastic artist. Post-war literary activity – for example the *Poetry Scotland* series published by William McLennan - consolidated the new vernacular poetry of the interwar years. But Muir’s post-war verse sets the dominant tone, to be succeeded by the ironic classicism of Norman McCaig. What Douglas Gifford has identified as a ‘mood of disillusion’ characterizes the Scottish novels of the 1950s and 60s, which suggests that it is the attitude of Shepherd rather than that of MacDiarmid which predominates.¹⁹ This is symptomatic of wider disenchantment with the aesthetic-political projects of the 1930s, perceived to be contaminated with totalitarian

¹⁸ Ibid., 11, 178

¹⁹ ‘Re-mapping Renaissance’, in Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alasdair Renfrew (eds), *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth Century Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam, 2004) 17-37, 26; the relationship of this mood to the work of the Renaissance itself is qualified by Roderick Watson, ‘The Modern Scottish Literary Renaissance’, in Ian Brown and Alan Riach (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2009), 75-87, 76-7.

impulses. It may also be in part the result of transferal of social hope to the state, entailing in its turn increased administration of the arts, alongside closer scrutiny of their relationship to broadcasting and education. Although a British phenomenon, these trends may be more marked in Scotland. Richard Finlay suggests that the establishment of the welfare state had a greater cultural impact in Scotland than elsewhere; it was also accompanied by a renewal of the Scottish establishment's commitment to devolved administration, already evident in the 1930s, that drew the teeth of the nationalist movement.²⁰

Devolution and the transformation of critique: 1970-2000

It has become a commonplace to suggest that Scottish literature undergoes a further renaissance in the 1980s. This implies a further resurgence of the same impulse, but in fact there are significant differences. These are caused in part by external changes in the relationship between art and culture. In the 1920s and 1930s it had been common to see art as a sphere set apart from the cultural, and hence as a space within which cultural change might be explored, mapped, anticipated or even stimulated. But by the last decades of the twentieth century, the autonomy of the artistic sphere from the social can no longer be taken for granted. This has a political consequence insofar as artists and writers are increasingly reluctant to see themselves as possessing a privileged point of view; it also has significances for artistic production. The writers of the twentieth century Renaissance had specifically sought to combine the

²⁰ For Richard Finlay, 'the mood of optimism' had 'a deeper resonance [in Scotland] simply because there was more for the state to do in terms of economic and social regeneration' *A Partnership For Good: Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880*, (Edinburgh, 1997), 134.

revitalisation of national culture with its forceful aesthetic critique. In contrast, over the course of the devolutionary period a division of artistic labour emerges between the production of national culture and its avant-garde critique.

This difference between the two eras – and its political valence – can be clearly seen by contrasting attitudes to tradition. Neil Gunn writes in 1940: ‘Only inside his own tradition can a man realise his greatest potentiality; just as, quite literally, he can find words for his profoundest emotion only in his native speech or language. This admits of no doubt, and literature, which is accepted as man’s deepest expression of himself, is there to prove it’.²¹ Gunn’s confidence is as striking as the high value attributed to literature, and his emphasis on the innate emotional connection between language, literature and cultural tradition. A more typical view from the later period not only contests the importance of tradition, but aligns writing precisely with doubt and uncertainty: ‘I am a woman. I am heterosexual, I am more Scottish than anything else and I write. But I don’t know how these things interrelate. [...] I have been asked for a personal perspective on my writing, Scottishness in literature and Scottishness in my work, but my whole understanding of writing and my method for making it does not stem from literary or national forms and traditions’.²² A.L. Kennedy’s wariness here may suggest a retreat from the attempt to forge a national literature, and hence from politics. But what the writing of devolutionary Scotland loses in terms of providing co-ordinating points of cultural identification and recognition, it gains back in terms of critical force.

²¹ ‘On Tradition’, in Alistair McCleery (ed.), *Landscape and Light* (Aberdeen, 1987), 203-206, 205.

²² A.L. Kennedy, ‘On Not Changing the World’, in Ian A. Bell (ed.) *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction*, (Cardiff, 1995), 100-102, 100.

The new writing that emerges from Scotland in the 1980s is varied. But in its deflationary conception of the place of art in society, its suspicions of the designs that history has on the individual, its concern to reinscribe class and gender as interruptions of social consensus but not as the pivotal engine of history, it reconstitutes the realm of aesthetics as a place of restless critical questioning, but rarely of national affirmation. In the process, literature redefines its traditional claim to 'truth', now being more concerned not in marking its distance not from the kitsch falsification of tradition, but from the journalistic falsification of reality and the pressure to contribute directly to the production and reproduction of social life. This aligns the novelists more closely with the poets than with the historians. Frank Kuppner:

Now, I am fascinated by such, as it were, pauses in life,
As being closer to what life normally is
Than the supreme events which documents tend to fill with,
As if only spectacular oceans are deep.²³

In these developments, Scottish literature comes into line with international trends, in the process acquiring the external recognition on which the claim to have successfully renewed cultural tradition depends, while also marketing 'Scotland the brand' to support the tourist industries. The result is both a turn away from questions of identity and a suspicion of the box of 'literary tradition' into which writers had been forced.

²³ 'Passing Through Doorways', in Douglas Dunn (ed.), *Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry* (London, 1992), 377-385, 379.

For the writing of the 1920s and 1930s, politics was to be thought in terms of history, placing a premium on tradition. For the later period, politics is understood primarily through autonomy. This puts a greater stress on the tensions between the individual and collectivity in general. It brings Scottish writing closer to the scepticism of Shepherd about the possibility of individual fulfilment within community, than to MacDiarmid's idealist future poetry. Where mid-century writers had looked for spaces of lyrical freedom within the individual self, later writing is more strongly marked by the suggestion that in non-reconciled social conditions, there can be no complete or whole self for the individual and that the aesthetic experience of freedom is at best solipsism, at worst irresponsibility. Towards the end of Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1958), Janie experiences an epiphany which the novel describes as 'true freedom. Out here beyond beeswax'. Associated throughout the novel with folksong and the traces of an older oral culture, but also with the vivid impulse of Biblical language acting on the imagination, these moments of lyric interiority promise a temporary point of connection between Janie and the environment, both natural and cultural, that sustains her: 'She shut her eyes to feel the sun groping warmly over her and hotly finding her. You could know an invisible world if you were blind. You could feel its being trembling. Smell its nearness. Hear the thin murmur of its voice'.²⁴ But in Kennedy's novels, the desire for independence is revealed as narcissism, the attempt to protect the self from the risk entailed by admitting our dependence on others: for Jennifer, narrator of 'So I Am Glad' 'an independent life' is: 'That impossible thing. Free from false complications'.²⁵ Negotiating this tension, her work alternates detailed maps of alienated social existence with tentative, fragile and fungible experiences of possible fulfilment.

²⁴ Jessie Kesson, *The White Bird Passes* (Edinburgh, 2003), xxx.

²⁵ A.L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad* (London, 1996), 181.

This reversal of perspective is in part the consequence of the cultural nationalist tradition itself becoming a force to be rejected. In 1993 the poet Kathleen Jamie recalled that

I was being told in this loud but subliminal way “You must read MacDiarmid and take those ideas on and espouse his ideas”, I was told there was this poem that I had to read, it was called A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle. Drunk? Men? Thistle? What? This was what we’d been striving to get away from for umpteen years. This is the smoky darkness of those pubs that you weren’t allowed into because you were a woman. Yes? No. No, not for me.²⁶

MacDiarmid’s avant-gardism had undoubtedly been an inspiration for younger writers such as Edwin Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay, but the literature of the early Scottish revival could itself be perceived as a prescriptive straitjacket. The folk revival of the 1960s had also contributed a neo-romantic and volkisch strand that identified language with people, abolishing the tension between the aesthetic and the vernacular that had nourished the experimental language of the modernists.

The strongest influence on the later period is the sense of disenfranchisement arising from the political upheaval of the 1970s. The true inheritors of the modernist social impulse in Scotland had not been the artists but the planners, who in the postwar decades had undertaken the transformation both of the Highlands and of Scotland’s cities. It is the failure of these infrastructural changes to effect substantive social transformation that marks the literature of urban decay, from Morgan’s ‘Glasgow

²⁶ quoted by Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books* (London, 2007), 553.

Sonnets' (1972) to Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* (1989). 'It's not the 1930s now,' wrote Edwin Morgan in the former,

Hugh MacDiarmid forgot
in 'Glasgow 1960' that the feast
of reason and the flow of soul have ceased
to matter to the long unfinished plot
of heating frozen hands.²⁷

Just as the coming of the welfare state had held a disproportionate promise in Scotland, so the collapse of post-war consensus was felt more strongly. The literary and political magazines of the period show the influx of radical political impulses – drawn from the New Left, from the feminist movement, and from post-Marxist socialist theories — alongside a more nationalist emphasis on the recovery of the national past. Asserting through the form of their work the texture and resilience of the individual voice, writers like Tom Leonard and James Kelman developed a literature that explores the parallels between aesthetic and political autonomy. Artistic achievement is equated with the negation of the demands made upon the writer by the dominant culture: it is at best successful resistance, not transformation. Crucially, these authors' participation in radical political activism attests to their refusal to conflate art and politics – prefiguring their later suspicion of the Yes movement.

The impact of these changing contexts can be illustrated clearly in the problematic situation of William McIlvanney, a novelist who played a vocal political role as an advocate of Scottish independence, but whose work has been marginalized in

²⁷ 'Glasgow Sonnets', in *Collected Poems* (Manchester, 1990), 289-292, 290.

discussion of the 'second Renaissance' of the 1980s and 1990s. In his 1996 novel *The Kiln* the protagonist Tom Docherty sets out aspirations for his novel which seem to align closely with McIlvanney's: the attempt to memorialize working class folkways, lending dignity and depth to the passing moments of ordinary lives. Docherty connects this with a non-doctrinal, socialist humanism that he identifies with Scottish tradition, but which he sees as vanishing in the changing political and social landscape. By making his protagonist a novelist, McIlvanney seeks to close the gap between artistic experience and social life that founds the specifically aesthetic critique of a work like *The House With The Green Shutters*. But Docherty's exploration of his own self-alienation suggests that this split has merely been internalized in the figure of the artist, as the agonized self-consciousness of the community.

The pioneer in prose fiction of the period is James Kelman, who departs from the more conventional formal qualities of McIlvanney's realism, while sharing the latter's commitment to the dignity of working-class life. Kelman's use of more ambiguous, fractured styles, specifically targets our desire for the redemptive acknowledgement of social contradiction through its fictional representations. This is a shift from existentialist humanism to a more radical challenge akin to nihilism, in which conventional social forms – family, community, tradition – are revealed to be saturated in power relations, and hence insufficient as a basis to sustain social hope. History, reduced in McIlvanney's work to an incomprehensible fate that can only be endured, becomes in Kelman a destructive nightmare. For Kelman any concession to conventional narrative expectations dissolves the critical role of the artwork, and reduces literature to entertainment. This opens a second fault-line between his project

and that of McIlvanney, an early exponent of what had become by 2014 the dominant, and defiantly generic, mode in Scottish fiction: crime writing. The highly conventional characteristics of the detective novel frame and neutralize its social and political content, reinforcing a disenchanted view of the social world as simple common sense.

The work of Alasdair Gray is exemplary of the changing status of the relationship between imagination and politics in the period, and of the distance travelled from the idealism of the Renaissance. Gray sets out to write the epic of the post-war welfare state in *Lanark*, but finds himself anatomizing its failures: corporatist capitalism is revealed as bureaucratic centralism, tied to a system of international states in which feigned democracy masks the rapacious exploitation of the earth by multinational corporations. The alignment of Institute, Council and Creature – roughly speaking, the interlocking systems of modern politics, the arts and sciences, and capitalism – suggests a critical diagnosis of the failure of modernity as thoroughgoing as that of Muir. Despite the persistent ironic demonstration in the realist books that Thaw's desire to pursue his art in peace is not just unrealistic, but selfish and life-denying, when his counterpart Lanark strives to act politically, but finds himself a helpless participant in a process beyond his control, the novel honours his good intentions. The implication is that the romantic linkage of artistic to personal and political freedom assumed by Thaw is itself a modern distortion, parallel to the distortion of political life under the conditions of capitalism and modern democracy. Thaw's complaint that Glasgow is uninhabitable because unimagined by artists has been widely mistaken as a call for a political revival to be led by cultural representation, as if we can only believe in something we have seen depicted by the imagination. In fact Gray's hopes

are invested in a return to an earlier ideal – of the renaissance city-state in which neither art nor politics are premised on the false bill of goods sold by capitalism and romanticism alike. This is what distances Gray's patriotism from the nationalism for which it is often mistaken. His idealization of the city state, seen as epitome of commercial and political patronage of the arts, of the municipal as the appropriate scale for political improvement, squares with his classicist appreciation of the small and his love of the local.

Gray's struggle with the form of the novel – his career is in many ways a series of fascinating but failed experiments – may follow from the difficulty of finding a modern shape for his political beliefs. Nastler's stated aims in *Lanark* are distinctively pre-modern – 'to show a moving model of the world as it is with them inside it' – but this geometrical model of the physical and spiritual universe implies necessity as a cosmological principle, against which the novel must struggle to vindicate its protagonist's freedom.²⁸ As Gray recognizes, this distorts its worldview. When in Provan, Lanark meets two men, one an optimist, one a pessimist. The former comments:

'You pessimists always fall into the disillusion trap. From one distance a thing looks bright. From another it looks dark. You think you've found the truth when you've replaced the cheerful view by the opposite, but true profundity blends all possible views, bright as well as dark.'²⁹

If we take this as an admission that *Lanark* may have failed to find a balance between the positive and the negative, we might understand *1982 Janine* as an attempt at a new start. The fatalistic account of human nature drawn by *Lanark* – man is the pie

²⁸ Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (London, 1991), 494.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 477.

that bakes and eats himself – is reversed into the affirmation of human potential as recognition of the divine potential within. Imagination is in all of us – however pornographic in its current form – and a process of psychic reintegration might ground a renewal. ‘I am the eyeball by which the universe sees and knows itself divine’: as the silent quotation from Shelley’s ‘Ode to Apollo’ suggests, Gray draws now on the transcendental imagination of the romantics. Imagination is the essence of the divine in all of us: and it is always open to us to accept its power working within us.³⁰ *1982 Janine* affirms again what *Lanark* has rejected, but at the cost of dissolving the distance between the artist and the engineer: in re-working C.P. Snow’s account of the two cultures, Gray places imagination at the basis of both the arts and the sciences. Only recognition of their unity would put technology into the service of ends defined through a larger account of human flourishing, reversing the disastrous modern tendency to subordinate the human to the technical. This is not a matter of waiting, but of activity in the here and now: in the much-cited slogan, to work *as if* in the days of a better nation, or to assume that the Renaissance project has already been completed. This risks blurring a distinction between art and politics that only holds for an unredeemed society, accounting perhaps for the fabular quality of Gray’s historical political essays, and the essayistic quality of some of his prose fiction.

Gray’s analysis makes the arts only an example of a generalized model of production, and displaces them from the privileged place that *Lanark* has explored, and rejected, and on which the Renaissance writers had staked their own claim for the transformative power of literature. Despite Gray’s status as a figurehead of Scottish artistic engagement in the Referendum period, *1982 Janine* suggests that the

³⁰ Alasdair Gray, *1982 Janine* (London: 1984), 70.

imagination of the artist should have no privileged place in the national conversation, except to the extent that it helps us recognize a creative power within us all. If there is a clear precedent set here for the language of creative possibility found in the Yes campaign, and for the identification by many writers of independence with a discourse of responsibility and self-reliance, *1982 Janine* is also an early example of the tendency to see political disagreement as pathological deviation.³¹ Jock's Toryism becomes in Gray's hands a psychic disease and not a political position. Ironically, given Gray's apparent republicanism, this leaves little place for the politics of public debate and persuasion, and the novel scorns rhetoric as the pure expression of power.

Referendum and 'cultural confidence': 2000-2014

Every political event entails the possibility of innovation: not just a change of policy, but the discovery that a more profound transformation has already taken place, that we no longer stand where we thought we did. The power of the nation as a political figure is that it provides a temporal frame through which to grasp the shifting balance between loss and invention, and to stabilize our experience of change. This structure must be the site of an intense moral ambivalence, as we inevitably familiarise the strangeness of the past in the course of preserving it in recognizable forms, while we risk cancelling the difference of the future by seeing it as an extrapolation of the present. As social systems become increasingly differentiated, complex and intermeshed through globalization, our need to simplify through figures of identification becomes more powerful, but potentially more treacherous. The

³¹ See many of the contributions to Scott Hames (ed.), *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh, 2012).

Referendum campaign can be said to have contributed to a major refurnishing of the symbolic horizon within which debates about art and politics in Scotland are framed, and against which possible futures are measured. If the events of 2014 underlined the distance travelled since the referendum of 1979, they also revealed and accelerated more profound changes.

This change was most clearly registered as a transformation in perceptions of the relationship between cultural criticism and national traditions. In the early 1980s, discussion of the relationship between literature and nation often found itself returning to the debates of the 1930s, in seeking to redress perceived discontinuities and failings in artistic and political tradition: Barbara and Murray Grigor's *Scotch Myths* exhibition (1981) and film (1982) coinciding with the republication of Muir's *Scott and Scotland* by Polygon (1982). Over the course of the following two decades, a self-conscious programme of historiographical recovery comprehensively undermined the empirical basis for that interpretation of history. Rather than asking why Scotland had not produced modern forms in the arts, now cultural historians drew attention to continuing and vital traditions of Scottish literature, philosophy, painting and music. The question became not so much the existence but the distinctiveness or integrity of such traditions, and their historical significance. The period of devolution had seen a major restructuring of the discursive field which, in the wake of the post-war collapse of the Renaissance aspiration that a political revolution should be led by the arts, inscribed a new opposition between national culture and artistic critique. This divide was exacerbated by a revival of Scottish cultural history which relieved writers and artists of the burden of explaining past failures, filling gaps in the historical record, or of representing to itself a nation that –

as the argument had once gone – had been let down by historians. This is what was widely described as ‘cultural confidence’, a frame for the debate to which both sides in the Referendum could appeal.

Confidence means cultural self-recognition, a perception of national difference in the mode not of critique but of satisfaction. Both are vulnerable to exceptionalism, but if the weakness of the former is its tendency towards what Cairns Craig has called ‘nostophobia’, the diagnosis of the products of the national culture as inherently debased, the risk of the latter is an uncritical mythopoeic positivity with disavowed political aims.³² This could be interpreted as the completion of the Renaissance project – but equally as its abdication. Certainly, evaluation of Scottish tradition no longer rests so centrally on the distinction between art and kitsch that had driven the critical engine of the first Renaissance. There was evidence of this: in 2014 the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum had hosted major retrospectives of the work of both Jack Vettriano, whose nostalgic figurative art had been long ignored by curators, and of Alasdair Gray. Cultural historians too were less concerned with the demand to distinguish between reality and representation, in the light of postmodern doctrines that reality was always in part the product of representations, and the nation always the sum of its own imaginings. Charting the distance between his own work and the ‘Scotch myths’ exhibition, Murray Pittock concluded: ‘we all have our myths, and it turned out that “Scotch myths” are no worse than anybody else’s’.³³

³² Cairns Craig, ‘Nostophobia’, in Jonathan Murray, Fidelma Farley and Rod Stoneman (eds.), *Scottish Cinema Now* (Cambridge, 2009), 56-71.

³³ Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties*, (London, 2008), 123.

In one sense, this could be described as a manifestation of confidence: recognition of Scottish cultural production as being of no less intrinsic interest than any other. But it might equally be regarded as complacency. The culturalist interpretation of Scottish political history claimed the referendum campaign as the fulfilment of the aspirations of the Renaissance writers. But this in fact expressed the precise reversal of the relationship between art and society that was the foundation of the Renaissance project. Writers of the inter-war Renaissance saw themselves as a cultural vanguard – the challenge was to prove that genuine creation was possible and thereby set an example for the creation of a modern nation: through social revolution, economic revival, through the restoration of tradition, through the destruction of national kitsch and the toppling of false idols. Nearly a century later, participants in the referendum debate could take for granted that Scottish art and culture were possible, because widely acclaimed and acknowledged. But if the cultural nationalist position were true, any claims of art to stand apart from politics and social process, to provide a space for reflection or challenge, had to be set aside: if MacDiarmid can stand alongside Boswell and Scott, as he did in Andrew Marr's BBC television series 'Great Scots' as one of the 'writers that shaped a nation', has he in turn become a sham bard?

This is to some extent borne out by the reception of the Renaissance legacy: the vigour and radicalism of the earlier period proved hard to evaluate for critics in the wake of devolution. Cultural historians of the 1980s and 1990s sought to redress the consequences arising from the scorched-earth Renaissance tendency to scant the achievement of the preceding centuries; they were also concerned that the racial vocabulary in which they were often expressed exposes the ideals which underpinned

the 1920s and 1930s as archaic and essentialising.³⁴ Conversely, just as the new pluralism allowed writers to move on from the language debates of the 1930s, critics have been tempted to see the Renaissance as a successful precedent. This is to take the art produced by the Renaissance as itself the solution to the social and economic problems that it sought to diagnose. If we reduce social questions to matters of culture, then the production of art that succeeds on its own terms, while falling into line with standards set internationally, might be seen as a form of renewal. But as MacDiarmid cautioned against just this interpretation in his draft *Aesthetics in Scotland* (1950): reference to the ‘Scottish Renaissance’ ‘does not imply that that has been achieved, but simply that it is what is being aimed at’.³⁵ To confuse the creation of successful artworks with the achievement of a society in which art is no longer an insult to the conditions of unfreedom in which many of its inhabitants live is to betray the legacy of the Renaissance. The aesthetic critique of modernity depends on the differentiation between art and culture – between the normative standards and conventions of society and works which challenge and repudiate them. Historians are clear that the Renaissance has little visible impact in its own day: tempting for the cultural historian to celebrate their achievement in retrospect by way of redeeming their struggle.³⁶

³⁴ For representative examples: Gifford, ‘Re-mapping Renaissance’; Sarah Dunnigan, ‘The Return of the Repressed’ in Carruthers et. al. (eds), *Beyond Scotland*, 111-31; Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh, 1999); Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke, 2004).

³⁵ *Aesthetics in Scotland* [c.1950], reprinted in Alan Riach (ed.), *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs* (Manchester, 1996), 78-129, 85.

³⁶ See Catriona MacDonald, *Whaur Extremes Meet: Scotland’s Twentieth Century*; For Ewen A. Cameron, *Impaled Upon A Thistle: Scotland Since 1880*, (Edinburgh, 2010), it was ‘too remote from the day-to-day concerns of the Scottish people’, 173.

We are now in a position to assess the first part of Alan Warner's suggestion that there has been a continuous 'project' of nation formation in twentieth-century Scotland, or as he elaborated in an interview of the same period: 'There's a school in Scottish literature that goes back to the 20s when writers and poets felt they were through literature building a nation, a virtual nation, an imagined nation'.³⁷ This can be seen to be partially correct: imagination was required to conjure alternative possibilities to the moribund nation at hand. However, Warner seems to accept the Renaissance critique of Scottish life – as insufficiently artistic – as a statement of historical fact. This overlooks the fact that the call for new standards of taste and new forms of critique is required precisely to overthrow Burns and Scott, writers who were felt to have been only *too* successful in creating an imagined – read imaginary – nation. Warner's comments also reflect the modern assumption that artistic imagination precedes and contributes to politics, assigning complacently to the art of the 1920s and 1930s a cultural value about which its producers, whether idealists or skeptics, had been more critical. The tension between memory and forgetting is constitutive of the cultural work of history. Yet the redefinition of the art of the Renaissance not just as an episode in the prehistory of the contemporary, but as its very origin, risks cancelling out its critical distance from society.

Scottish culture is alleged to be newly at ease with itself, negating that artistic questioning which is directed not so much to the national culture – since to presume this horizon is already to affirm too much – but of the violence with which any

³⁷ Laura Barton, 'Alan Warner: booze, books and why he's backing independence' *The Guardian*, Tuesday 19 August 2014.
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/19/alan-warner-booze-books-why-voting-scottish-independence>

cultural formation addresses the individual. The ambiguity of this restoration settlement can also be traced clearly in the rhetoric of the referendum.

One notable feature was the concern of both campaigns not to appeal to history. This was a political decision to avoid being painted as the reactionary side, but it can also be seen as an echo of the new historiographical stress on the intertwining of varying forms of unionism with national sentiment throughout the period since 1707. Where Linda Colley's influential 1992 work *Britons* had understood Anglo-Scottish relations after Union as a project to build a single British nation around a shared Protestantism, a considerable body of historiography has now argued, on the contrary, that 'the dual existence of Scottish and British national identities [in the nineteenth century] was not regarded as weakness by contemporaries'.³⁸ This challenges the nationalist tendency to construct history in oppositional terms: indeed, Colin Kidd has argued that historically nationalist sentiment has more commonly been associated with unionist than separatist politics: 'While there is a huge gulf between the most extreme forms of unionism and nationalism, the most influential forms of unionism have been tinged with nationalist considerations, while the mainstream of nationalism has tended to favour some form of wider association with England'.³⁹

These changing perspectives on political history must undermine the view of the Renaissance, persisting into the 1980s, that the cultural achievements of the preceding centuries had been the unnatural products of a history distorted by Union. The new

³⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1830* (New Haven, 1992); Graeme Morton and R. J. Morris, 'Civil Society, Governance and Nation, 1832-1914', in R. A. Houston and W. W. J. Knox (eds.) *The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London, 2001), 355-416,

³⁹ *Union and Unionism: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, 2008), 300.

historiography stressed instead the malleability and variation of the idea of nationhood. Just as national symbols had proved themselves amenable to competing political mobilizations through the nineteenth century, so had a distinctive Scottish politics become embedded in civil administration, maintaining not just the ‘autonomy’ of Scottish national traditions, but a distinct tradition of resistance to the unitary British state.⁴⁰ Politically, the evidence of the historical co-existence of a strong sense of Scottish national identity with approval of participation in the British state, and in empire, could be claimed as support the argument of the ‘no’ camp that a strong sense of national belonging was perfectly compatible with political and / or cultural support for the United Kingdom. It also de-legitimated the appeal to historical precedent, suggesting that the present situation was another stage in a long-running negotiation of political control between political actors at different levels, complicated by changing understandings of identity. Indeed there was a risk for advocates of independence that greater understanding of Scotland within the period of Union would normalize the differentiation between cultural and political subsystems.

The loss of force of the argument from tradition is partly responsible for the striking degree to which both sides presented themselves as defenders of the status quo – only independence or continuing partnership in the Union would allow Scotland to preserve a political culture that reflected its social consensus. The language of aesthetics met the need of the Yes campaign for an unobjectionable and non-specific vocabulary that left itself open to radical construction and would aid in building a

⁴⁰ Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860* (East Linton, 1999); Lindsay Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994); Graeme Morton, ‘Identity within the Union State, 1800-1900’, in T. M. Devine and Jenny Wormald (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History*, 474-490.

political coalition. It also served a valuable second function in helping strike a balance between radical promise (to keep the energetic grassroots democratic movements on board) and emphasising continuity (to appear to minimise the threat of disruptive change). Creativity and imagination were unobjectionable — safely depoliticised — and yet traditionally associated with resistance to capitalism. Indeed the Yes campaign's exploitation of artistic commitment to independence echoes closely the New Labour government of Tony Blair, in its exploitation of culture and celebrity to establish extra-political credentials, and in linking cultural production to soft power, interlocking the administration of culture with economic and political objectives in the arts themselves, but also in education and tourism.⁴¹

Both sides stressed current confidence — as if the discourse of cultural pathology that had been a familiar characteristic of twentieth century intellectual life in Scotland were finally banished. But the link to creativity and imagination tilted this gesture in favour of the Yes campaign. The idea of the creative nation underscores the idea of Scotland's maturity, both achieved and potential — a creative and modern nation is already ready for a further radical step; a creative nation can be optimistic in relation to the risks entailed by independence because of its human resources and capabilities. If the No side were to stress — as in the event they did — the economic and financial risks of independence, they could be accused of lack of vision. There was of course also another implication, one which the Yes campaign would not have avowed, but which was an inevitable consequence of aligning culture and politics: given the likelihood of defeat, association with the arts would allow the Yes campaign to seize the commanding heights of the cultural economy, to stigmatise their opponents as

⁴¹ Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*, (London, 2014), Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, (Stanford, 2013).

unimaginative, lacking faith, confidence or belief in country. If Yes was aligned with imagination, any future failure could be blamed on their opponents, and stigmatised as treacherous lack of faith in the radical promise. You can argue about economic policy, currency and projected oil revenues, but you can't argue with a dream.

Étienne Balibar has proposed the term 'fictive ethnicity' to describe the relationship between historical discourse and national identification in the modern period:

No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicized – that is represented in the past and in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions.⁴²

Both sides in the Referendum debates sought to avoid reference to the past, and liberal nationalism in Scotland wears its appeals to cultural diversity as a point of pride, and to ward off the charge of archaism or ethnocentrism. Yet the emphasis of Balibar's argument is not on the obvious truth that nations are inherently political formations which legitimate their claim to authority through the manufacture of history, nor on the postmodern variant which elides the operations of power by rewriting this in terms of the popular imagination of community. His point is that the production of ethnicity is the production of *obviousness*; that the sheer givenness by which an identity, although lacking in any determinate content, presents itself as the horizon against which political negotiation takes place, has a history. In 2001 the

⁴² Étienne Balibar, 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology', in Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 86-106, 96.

sociologist David McCrone had described Scotland taking an ‘almost [...] cultureless, post-industrial journey into the unknown’, observing that dominant

attitudes and values have been distilled [...] so that they become ‘as if’ Scottish, even though such attitudes are fairly widespread throughout most Western societies [...] In other words, there is nothing distinctive about them, but they become useful markers of how a society wishes to present itself.⁴³

What McCrone observes is precisely the production of ethnicity – the operation of the ‘as if’ which naturalizes contingent social facts.

The 2014 Referendum campaign agreement of both sides on the strength of Scottish culture – expressed in terms of confidence – suggests that what Craig sees as a ‘rising tide of cultural nationalism’ might be better described in terms of naturalization of culture as a symbolic horizon for political discussion, bringing with it the attendant risk of substituting cultural for political debate, and of politicizing culture in instrumental ways. To see this in terms of the production of Scottish ethnicity emphasizes that it is a process by which those horizons of political debate become populated with new myths. A historical view of the Referendum suggests that the new rhetoric of aesthetics in political debate attests to the rising tide of identity thinking, a shift that risks generating new tensions within the model of liberal nationalism espoused by the SNP and, albeit more cautiously, approved by the broader civic society coalition that had sponsored devolution from the Scottish side of the border in the 1980s and 1990s. In this context cultural historians face a dual imperative to recognise rather than disavow their role in this political process, and to find modes which do not sublate the critical questioning of artworks into the production of

⁴³ David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Nation* (London: 2001), 148, 174.

national culture. If the Yes campaign is to have a lasting influence through a more thoroughgoing debate over the democratization of Scotland, it must contend with the legacy of this powerful identification *not* of Scotland with its historical past, but of politics as such with the expression of identity.